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ABSTRACT

This report presents new evidence on the number and characteristics of Hispanic high school dropouts in comparison to other high school dropouts. Examining trends over the 1990s based on the latest available Census data, it documents how the aggregate published Hispanic high school dropout rate overstates the number of Hispanics leaving U.S. secondary schools without graduating. This results from lumping together three subgroups of Hispanic youths: the native-born, foreign-born who attend U.S. schools, and foreign-born who emigrate primarily for employment and do not enroll in U.S. schools. When the first two categories are examined separately, the dropout rate is substantially smaller. However, the Hispanic dropout rate is still twice as high as the dropout rate for comparable non-Hispanic whites. Hispanics who do not finish high school have radically different basic skills and labor market characteristics than white and African American high school dropouts. Those differences are sharpest when considering the foreign-born Hispanics who have little or no contact with U.S. schools. Even within the Hispanic population, there are pronounced differences between foreign-educated and U.S.-educated dropouts. The average white dropout earns $7,300 per year, compared to $6,500 for U.S.-born Hispanic dropouts and $10,000 for immigrant Hispanic dropouts. Includes three appendices on data sources, other measures of Hispanic dropout rate, and statistics for California, Texas, and Florida. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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HISPANIC YOUTH DROPPING OUT OF U.S. SCHOOLS: MEASURING THE CHALLENGE

by

Richard Fry

June 12, 2003

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Richard Fry
Senior Research Associate
Pew Hispanic Center

Fry conducts empirical research on the education and labor market characteristics of U.S. racial and ethnic populations. Fry was a Senior Economist at the Educational Testing Service, where he focused on trends in U.S. college enrollment.
rfry@pewhispanic.org

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The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Pew Charitable Trusts

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High school dropout rates are a key performance measure for the American education system. This report by the Pew Hispanic Center shows that the standard method for calculating the dropout rate leads to a distorted picture of the status of Hispanic students in U.S. schools.

In recent years an influx of young immigrants, who left school before coming to the United States, has swollen the ranks of those counted as Hispanic dropouts. Those youth present long-term policy challenges in language and employment training, but their level of school completion does not reflect the quality of U.S. schools or of Latino achievement in those schools. Rather their presence reflects immigration and labor force trends.

Focusing on data for Hispanics who have dropped out of U.S. schools before completing high school reveals a problem that is quite grave and that has serious long-term implications for the education system, Latino communities and the nation as a whole. However, these numbers show that the problem is not as bad as is commonly thought. Simply put, dropout rates of 30 percent or more are frequently cited for Hispanics overall, but these figures include a great many immigrants who never set foot in a U.S. school (see Appendix B). Counting only Latinos who dropped out after engaging the American education system yields a rate of about 15 percent among 16- to 19-year-olds. That is good news. The bad news is that this dropout rate is twice as high as the dropout rate for comparable non-Hispanic whites. Further on the positive side, this report finds that the dropout rate for Latinos in U.S. schools is improving as has been for non-Latinos.

This report demonstrates that while the retention of Hispanics in U.S. high schools is a broad and significant challenge, it is a much more manageable challenge than suggested by some of the most commonly cited statistics.

Some specific findings:

- Because of the enormous growth in the number of Hispanic youth due to immigration and high birth rates, the number of Latino 16- to 19-year-old dropouts grew dramatically, from 347,000 to 529,000 between 1990 and 2000. However, the dropout rate for native born Latinos declined over that period from 15.2 percent to 14.0 percent.
- Thirty-five percent of Latino youth are immigrants, compared to less than five percent of non-Latino youth.

- Of the 529,000 16- to 19-year-old Latino high school dropouts in 2000, one-out-of-three, or roughly 175,000, are immigrants who had little or no contact with U.S. schools.
- Nearly 40 percent of immigrant Mexican 16- to 19-year-olds are dropouts, while the dropout rate for Mexican immigrants educated in U.S. schools is 20 percent.
- The dropout rate for immigrant Central American youth is nearly 25 percent, but it is only 7 percent for U.S.-educated immigrant youth from Central America, about the same as for white youth.
- A lack of English-language ability is a prime characteristic of Latino dropouts. Almost 40 percent do not speak English well. The 14 percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds who have poor English language skills have a dropout rate of 59 percent.
- The unemployment rate for U.S.-born Latino dropouts is 26 percent, slightly better than for white dropouts. For immigrant Latino dropouts who attend U.S. schools the unemployment rate is 6.4 percent. Latino immigrant dropouts who never went to school in the U.S. have an 8.3 percent unemployment rate.
- The average white high school dropout earns $7,300 per year, compared to $6,500 for U.S.-born Hispanic dropouts and around $10,000 for immigrant Hispanic dropouts.

Improved educational attainment for Latinos is a key requirement for their overall, long-term economic success. By excluding the category of Latino youth who immigrate to the U.S. solely to find jobs, Latino educational progress in U.S. elementary and secondary schools becomes considerably clearer and more positive. The more carefully delineated statistics show a much lower dropout rate for Hispanic youth who are involved with U.S. schools, both native-born and immigrant, and they reveal much higher English-speaking abilities among U.S.-born Latinos than aggregate numbers suggest.

The more targeted statistics also provide nuances that should prove helpful in addressing problems and finding solutions. The low unemployment rates and relatively high salaries for immigrant Latinos who attend U.S. schools but drop out suggest that the lure of the job market for that segment of students poses a particular challenge. By and large, however, the improving dropout statistics show that educational and language-training efforts are paying off. That trend is good news for the Latino community and for educators striving for continued progress in the face of a rapidly increasing Hispanic student population.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

I. THE HISPANIC DROP-OUT RATE DURING THE 1990S 2

The Hispanic Dropout Rate Fell Marginally 2

Latinos Are More Likely to Drop Cut Than Other Youths 4

Absolute Number of Hispanic Dropouts Increased 4

II. LATINOS EDUCATED ABROAD VS. THOSE EDUCATED IN U.S. SCHOOLS SKEW DROPOUT FIGURES 5

Dropout Rates for All Latino Groups Are Distorted by the Inclusion of Non-U.S.-Educated Immigrants 7

III. LATINO DROPOUTS HAVE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS 8

English Language Abilities 8

Employment Rates 10

Unemployment Rates 10

Earnings 11

Gender 12

Poverty rate 12

CONCLUSIONS 12

REFERENCES 14

APPENDIX A 15

APPENDIX B 16

APPENDIX C 18

INTRODUCTION

The rate at which Latino youth drop out of high school is an important education indicator and is often interpreted as a key measure of how well Latino youth are faring in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. The attention paid to the Hispanic high school dropout rate is well deserved, but the rate itself is problematic.

Unlike either non-Hispanic whites or African-Americans, a significant share of Latino youth is foreign born. Some Latinos arrive young enough to have a full career in U.S. schools. Others split their educations between the United States and their countries of origin. Many who arrive as teens have little or no contact with U.S. schools and instead go directly into the labor force. Aggregate high school dropout rates based on population statistics do not distinguish between the varied backgrounds and schooling experiences typical of Latino youth.

An accurate assessment of dropout rates is important because this one measure plays such a major role in analyses of educational progress. Discussions of educational equity across racial and ethnic groups frequently utilize dropout rates to illustrate relative levels of educational attainment and opportunity.[1] And, indeed, the available evidence suggests that dropout rates are indicative of the general thrust of educational attainment across racial and ethnic groups even if they do not take account of all ultimate outcomes. [2]

Education policymakers want to know the trend in Latino high school dropout rates in order to assess progress and tailor solutions. The pressing questions include: Have the education reform movements of the 1990s succeeded in decreasing the Latino high school dropout rate? Are Latino secondary school students more likely than other students to drop out, and how has this differential changed over the 1990s? Because of immigration, however, the conventional published tabulations of federal agencies cannot shed light on how Latino youth are faring in U.S. schools.

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[1] The more prominent federal statistical publications on education, for instance, present trends in dropout rates by race/ethnicity (NCES, 2002a). Indeed, more detailed tabulations of dropout rates are available than other measures of elementary and secondary outcomes (NCES, 1998). To some extent this reflects the prominence given to trends in dropout rates over other measures of educational attainment among adolescents. For example, high school completion rates are not widely disseminated.

[2] Some dropouts do subsequently complete high school. But the route of completing high school through means other than graduation seems more difficult for Hispanic students than white students. Only 40 percent of Latino students who did not graduate high school subsequently pass the General Educational Development (GED) tests, compared to 57 percent of non-Hispanic white students who left high school (NCES, 2002b).

This report presents new evidence on the number and characteristics of Latino high school dropouts in comparison to other high school dropout populations. Looking at trends over the 1990s based on the latest available Census data, it documents how the aggregate published Hispanic high school dropout rate overstates the number of Hispanics leaving U.S. secondary schools without graduating. This results from lumping together three subgroups of the Latino youth population that need to be examined separately: the native-born, foreign-born who attend U.S. schools, and the foreign-born who emigrate primarily for employment and do not enroll in U.S. schools. When the first two categories—Latino youth who are actually getting their education in the United States—are examined separately, the dropout rate is substantially smaller than when all Latinos are bunched together.

The report also reveals that Latinos who do not finish high school have radically different basic skills and labor market characteristics than white and African American high school dropouts, and those differences are sharpest when considering the foreign-born Latinos who have little or no contact with U.S. schools. Indeed, even within the Latino population, there are pronounced differences between foreign-educated and U.S.-educated dropouts. In every case the demographic characteristics that contribute to the range of educational outcomes need to be considered when fashioning remedies.

I. THE HISPANIC DROP-OUT RATE DURING THE 1990S

The Hispanic Dropout Rate Fell Marginally

Despite a widespread impression that the situation is worsening, the Hispanic high school dropout rate, like the national high school dropout rate, fell during the 1990s.

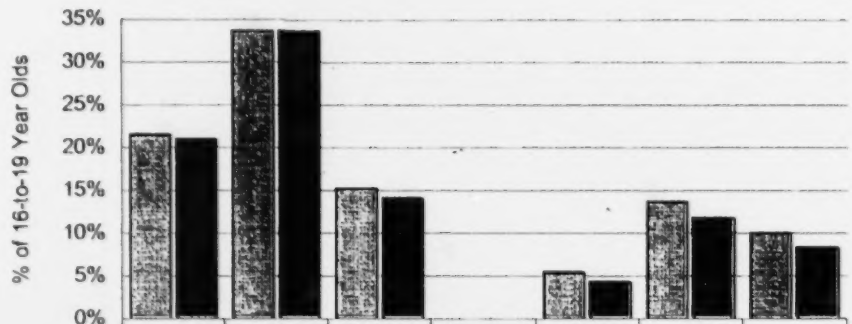
There are several conventional ways to tabulate dropout rates. The most common measure and the focus of this report is the "status dropout rate" which represents the fraction of a population in a given age bracket that has not completed high school and is not enrolled in school. These figures are typically drawn from a decennial census or the monthly Current Population Survey. It is important to remember that these data come from surveys that gather information on educational attainment, and other matters of course, from the population at large. Alternatively, dropout rates can be based on reporting by schools on how many students drop out versus how many originally enrolled, but presently national level rates are not tabulated since some states do not participate in the federal data collection efforts.

The Hispanic high school dropout rate fell from 21.6 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds in 1990 to 21.0 percent in 2000, using the status rate methodology. The

status high school dropout rate for all 16- to 19-year-olds fell from 11.2 percent in 1990 to 9.8 percent in 2000. The decline in status high school dropout rates was widespread. All the major racial/ethnic groups show a decrease in the incidence of youths dropping out of high school over the 1990s (Figure 1).

The choice of age bracket is a key factor in calculating status dropout rates, particularly for a population like Hispanic youth that is growing quickly due to the arrival of immigrants. Remember that a status dropout rate is based on a survey of the entire population and for youth that will include individuals who have been in the United States since the first day of kindergarten as well as immigrants who arrived as teenagers or young adults and never enrolled in U.S. schools.

Figure 1. High School Dropout Rates Declined for All Youth



	All Latino	Immigrant Latino	Native Latino	Asian/ Pacific	Black	White
1990	21.6%	33.7%	15.2%	5.4%	13.7%	10.0%
2000	21.0%	33.7%	14.0%	4.3%	11.7%	8.2%

Source: Decennial Census data and Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

Thus, the U.S. Department of Education comes to very different conclusions using a status dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001) based on the Current Population Survey. These calculations characterize dropout rates as stable since the late 1980s, rather than declining. Status dropout rates for 16- to 19-year-olds are preferable, particularly for Latinos. The narrower age range, closer to the typical age of high school graduation, is more accurate because of the large number of Hispanics who immigrate to the U.S. between the ages of 20 to 24. The educational status of these recent arrivals is not a reflection of U.S. elementary and secondary school performance since they resided abroad during their school-age years. Furthermore, the sample size available in the decennial Census data is much larger than the CPS. Our estimates are based on

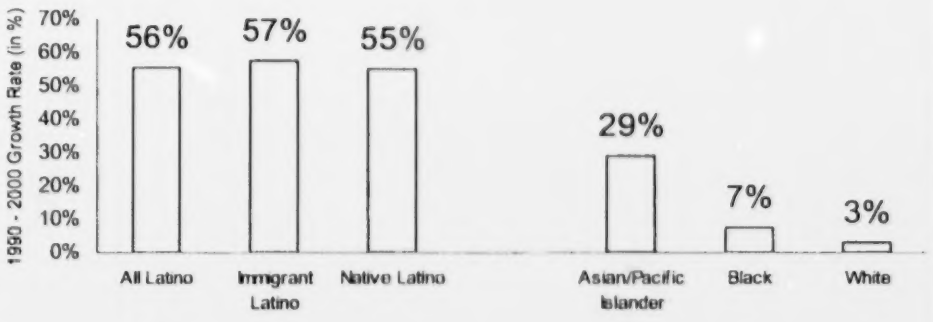
roughly 2.3 million 16- to 19-year-olds. The CPS includes about 15,000 16- to 24-year-olds in any given month.

Trends in Latino high school completion figures are consistent with declining Latino high school dropout rates. Among native-born Hispanic 18- to 19-year-olds, those who completed high school rose from 54.7 percent to 60.0 percent from 1990 to 2000. Among foreign-born Hispanic 18- to 19-year-olds, the high school completion rate rose from 32.0 percent to 38.1 percent over the decade (Vernez and Mizell, 2002).

Latinos Are More Likely to Drop Out Than Other Youths

Latino youth in the U.S. are more likely to have dropped out of school than other youth. In 2000, 21 percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds were school dropouts, in comparison to 8 percent of white youth[3] and 12 percent of African American youth. Although some of these young people will subsequently complete high school, many will not, and thus a disproportionately large share of Latino youth enter adulthood and the labor market with an important educational disadvantage.

Figure 2. Latinos Were the Fastest Growing Youth Population during the 1990s



Source: Decennial Census data

Absolute Number of Hispanic Dropouts Increased

Hispanic youths were the fastest growing youth population in the 1990s, increasing by 56 percent among 16- to 19-year-olds (Figure 2). In turn, Latinos

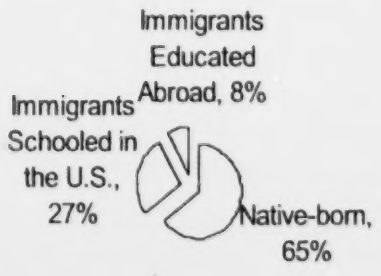
[3] This is the published rate for all white 16- to 19-year-olds, including both Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic whites. The non-Hispanic white dropout rate for 2000 is 6.9 percent. We present the total white rate in the text because the Census Bureau did not publish the non-Hispanic white dropout rate for 1990 in the SF3 files.

represented a growing share of that population, increasing from 11 percent of the 16- to 19-year-old population in 1990 to 16 percent in 2000. So it is not surprising that there was also an increase in the size of the Latino high school dropout population. Decennial Census data indicate that the number of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-old dropouts rose 52 percent, from 347,000 to 529,000. As a result, the fraction of the total high school dropout population that is Latino increased from 22 percent to 34 percent.

II. LATINOS EDUCATED ABROAD VS. THOSE EDUCATED IN U.S. SCHOOLS SKEW DROPOUT FIGURES

The aggregate 21 percent Hispanic dropout rate cannot be used as a key indicator of U.S. secondary school system performance. Although one-in-five Hispanic youth has not completed high school, many of them did not drop out of U.S. schools. On average, the schooling experiences of Hispanic youth are different than those of their non-Hispanic counterparts. Thirty-five percent of Latino youth are immigrants, in comparison to less than five percent of non-Latino youth. Some of these immigrant Latino youth only recently arrived in the United States and were educated in their native countries. Their educational status reflects the performance of Latin American school systems as well as decisions to emigrate rather than continue schooling. Although they are often counted as dropouts, their status does not reflect the performance of U.S. schools because many never "dropped in" after coming to this country.

Figure 3. Some Latino Youth Never Attended U.S. Schools



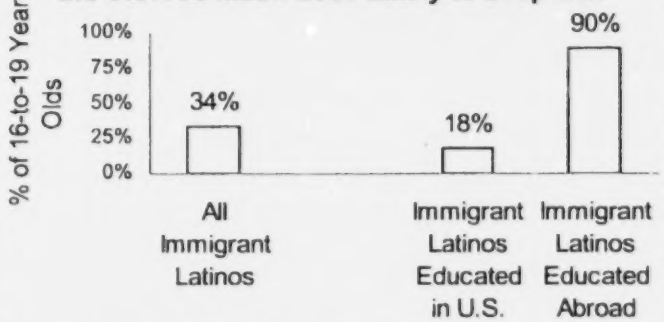
Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

To gauge the attainments of Hispanic youth in U.S. schools, therefore, one must clearly distinguish between Latino youth educated abroad versus those enrolled in U.S. schools at some point. We estimate that about 8 percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds are educated abroad (Figure 3).[4] Although 8 percent is a

[4] The Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS) does not ask respondents if they had ever been enrolled in the U.S. We impute whether foreign-born youth were educated in the U.S.

relatively small proportion, the Hispanic youth who receive all their schooling abroad greatly impact the dropout numbers. The aggregate 21 percent Hispanic dropout rate is inflated by Hispanic youth who went to school in their native country and subsequently immigrated to the United States. Hispanic youth who are educated abroad immigrate to the United States primarily to work. They have little or no exposure to U.S. schools and their educational outcomes do not reflect on U.S. school systems.

Figure 4. Immigrant Latinos Educated in the U.S. Are Much Less Likely to Drop Out



Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

Latino youth who are educated abroad are nearly all high school dropouts. Ninety percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds educated only in their home countries are high school dropouts (Figure 4). Of the 529,000 Latino high school dropouts *in toto* in 2000, one-out-of-three ,or roughly 175,000, are immigrant dropouts who were educated abroad.

What is the estimated dropout rate for Latino youth, both native born and immigrant, who have attended U.S. schools? The average estimated dropout rate for all U.S.-educated Latino 16- to 19-year-olds is about 15 percent. And a further distinction between the native and the foreign born has to be made looking at this population. The estimated dropout rate for native-born Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds is about 14 percent, the dropout rate is about 18 percent for U.S.-educated immigrant youth, i.e., those who arrive young enough to do most of their schooling here.

Even after removing the immigrants educated abroad from the calculations, Latino youth educated in U.S. schools are at a disadvantage compared to their peers in other ethnic and racial groups. The dropout rate of 15 percent for U.S.-educated 16- to 19-year-old Latino youth is higher than the comparable rate for African-Americans, 12 percent, and since the estimated dropout rate for white youth is 8

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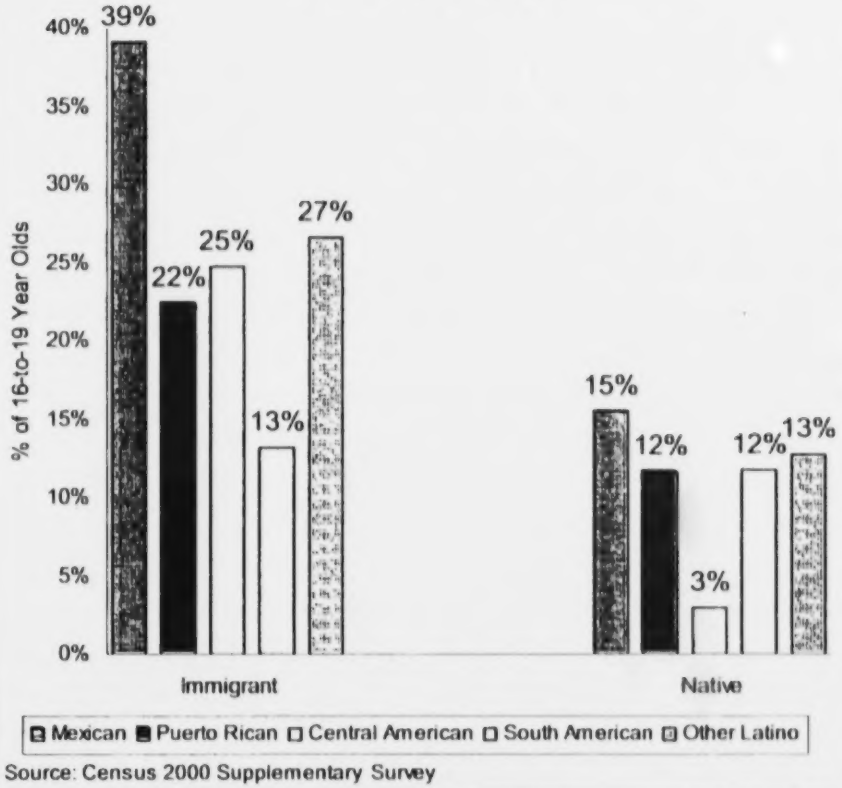
by comparing their age at migration to their estimated age of education completion. If age at migration exceeds the education completed plus six, then it is assumed that the individual was educated abroad. Betts and Lofstrom (2000) and Davila and Mora (2000) use the same algorithm to impute school location.

percent, Latino youth educated in the U.S. are about twice as likely to drop out of school as their white peers.

Dropout Rates for All Latino Groups Are Distorted by the Inclusion of Non-U.S.-Educated Immigrants

There is considerable diversity in the dropout rates among immigrant Latino populations according to their countries of origin. Nearly 40 percent of immigrant 16- to 19-year-olds of Mexican origin are dropouts (Figure 5). The measured dropout rate among immigrants from South America is 13 percent.

Figure 5. Native Born and Immigrants Differ Across All National Origin Groups



Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

As with the aggregate total, these figures provide a poor depiction of the relative success of the different Latino populations in U.S. schools. Among foreign-born Latinos there are substantially different outcomes for those who are enrolled in U.S. schools during their youth and those who end their education before emigrating. The dropout rates for U.S.-educated immigrants from Mexico and Central America are far below the aggregate rates. Among Mexican immigrants

educated in U.S. schools the dropout rate is 20 percent, compared to the 40 percent rate for Mexican immigrants overall.[5] Similarly, the aggregate dropout rate for immigrant Central American youth is nearly 25 percent, but U.S.-educated immigrant Central American youth drop out at an estimated rate of 7 percent, about the same rate as white youth. To judge how U.S. schools are performing for immigrant youth, it is important to disentangle how many immigrant youth are educated abroad versus in the U.S.

III. LATINO DROPOUTS HAVE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

In addressing the needs of young high school dropouts, educators need to be aware that the dropout populations have diverse demographic and labor force characteristics. Latino dropouts differ from white and African American dropouts in important ways. As noted above, within the Latino dropout category, however, there are three populations that also have distinct variations: the U.S.-born and educated, the foreign-born who receive at least some education in the U.S., and the foreign-born who attend school in their home countries and emigrate primarily for work opportunities.

English Language Abilities

English language ability is an important indicator for the likelihood of dropping out of high school among Latinos. Unlike most white and African American dropouts, Latino dropouts overall are not proficient English speakers. Almost 40 percent of Latino high school dropouts, including recent immigrants who never attended U.S. schools, do not speak English at least "well" (Table 1). But English proficiency is fairly widespread among Hispanic youth. In 2000, about 86 percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds either spoke only English or spoke English at least well. The 14 percent of Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds who have poor English language skills have a very high dropout rate (Figure 6). About 60 percent of these youth are high school dropouts. Among Latino youth with fluent English skills, about 15 percent are high school dropouts.

Fortunately, English language proficiency seems to be strongly correlated with U.S. schooling experience. Nearly all native Hispanic 16- to 19-year-olds speak English. Most Latino youth educated in U.S. schools speak English at least well. The U.S.-educated Latino youth who do not speak English fluently are primarily foreign

[5] These findings are also consistent with recent research on adolescent school enrollment. Hirschman (2001) reports that nonenrollment rates for recently arrived Mexican immigrants are "extraordinarily high," but Mexican adolescents who arrive at younger ages, and thus receive nearly all their schooling in the United States, "show only moderately higher rates of school attrition."

born and thus less likely to have been in U.S. schools since kindergarten. For immigrant Hispanic dropouts who have received at least some U.S. schooling, more than 55 percent speak English at least well. On the other hand, almost 80 percent of Latino immigrant dropouts who never attended U.S. schools do not speak English.

Table 1. Characteristics of 16-to-19 Year old High School Dropouts, 2000 (in percent)

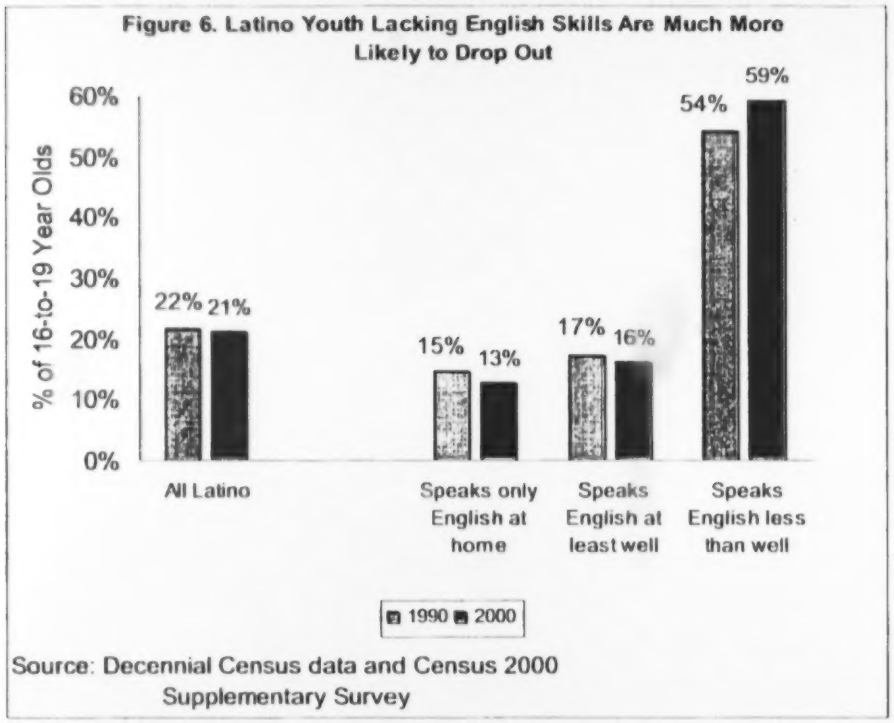
	NonHispanic White	NonHispanic Black	Hispanic	Native Hispanic	Immigrant Hispanic Educated in U.S. schools	Immigrant Hispanic Educated Abroad
Language						
Speaks Only English	91.5	98.0	14.9	32.3	1.0	1.9
Speaks Spanish						
Speaks English "Well"	8.0	1.3	46.9	63.7	54.3	19.8
Speaks English "Not Well"	0.5	0.7	38.2	3.9	44.7	78.3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Labor Force Status						
Not in Labor Force	32.0	40.4	33.7	34.7	39.7	28.1
Unemployed	19.3	25.0	10.3	17.1	3.9	6.0
Employed	48.7	34.6	56.0	48.1	56.4	65.9
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Usual Hours Worked per Week[1]						
Less than 20 hours	22.1	19.6	10.6	13.1	10.6	7.4
21 thru 35 hours	26.1	26.7	11.5	18.0	9.7	4.1
36 thru 40 hours	38.6	49.1	61.7	60.0	60.1	65.0
More than 40 hours	13.3	4.7	16.2	8.9	19.6	23.6
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Average Annual Earnings (in $)	7,270	5,230	8,463	6,549	9,995	10,026
Female	43.8	49.8	38.6	41.1	46.7	29.7
If Female, Has Own Child	14.4	13.3	17.2			
If Female, Child Born Within Last Year	14.7	17.6	20.8			
At or Below the Poverty Line	26.6	47.2	29.7	34.0	30.5	23.4
Residing Independently of Parents[2]	23.0	21.4	51.6	38.5		

Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

[1]The usual hours worked per week among respondents that reported working some time during the prior 12 months.

[2]The percent of 16-to-17 year-old high school dropouts who do not live with their parent(s). The Census Bureau does not tally living arrangements for youth above 17 years of age.

Of the half million Latino dropouts, only 9,000 are native-born youth who do not speak English at least well. In a comparison of 16- to 17-year-old Latino dropouts to Latino youth of the same age who remain in school, native Hispanic high school dropouts are more likely than their in-school counterparts not to know English (Table 2). Since dropouts tend to be older than youth who remain in school, the comparison of dropouts to the enrolled population is best done for a narrow age band.



Employment Rates

Latino youth in general tend to be relatively successful in the labor market in comparison to white and Black youth. They have higher earnings because they work longer hours (Fry and Lowell, 2002). The work orientation of Hispanic youth is also apparent among high school dropouts. Fifty-six percent of Hispanic high school dropouts hold jobs, in comparison to forty-nine percent of white dropouts.

Two-thirds of foreign-born Latino high school dropouts who were never enrolled in U.S. schools are employed. Of those who work, nearly 90 percent of this group work fulltime. Native-born Hispanic high school dropouts are active in the labor market, though to a lesser extent. Of those who work, nearly 70 percent of native-born Hispanic high school dropouts work fulltime, in comparison to 52 percent of white high school dropouts.

Unemployment Rates

Unemployment rates also underscore the relative success of Latino dropouts in the labor market in comparison to white high school dropouts. The unemployment rate for white high school dropouts is about 28 percent. For U.S.-born Latino high school dropouts the unemployment rate is slightly better, 26 percent.

But the unemployment rate among immigrant Latino dropouts presents a dramatically different picture. For foreign-born Latino dropouts who received some U.S. schooling the unemployment rate is 6.4 percent. For foreign-born Latino dropouts who never attended U.S. schools the unemployment rate is also a comparatively low 8.3 percent.[6]

Earnings

The relatively high labor market involvement of Latino high school dropouts results in relatively higher annual earnings in comparison to white and African American high school dropouts. The average white high school dropout earns $7,300 per year. The typical U.S.-born Hispanic high school dropout earns $6,500, and immigrant Latino high school dropouts earn around $10,000 per year.

Table 2. Characteristics of 16-to-17 Year old Hispanic Populations, 2000 (in percent)

	Did not complete high school, enrolled in school		Native High School Dropouts
	Native	Immigrant	
Number	748,294	251,515	56,235
Language			
Speaks only English	34.9	3.7	34.8
Speaks Spanish			
Speaks English "Well"	62.3	89.7	57.4
Speaks English "Not Well"	2.8	6.6	7.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0
Female	50.5	42.3	46.1
At or Below the Poverty Line	24.5	35.0	45.2
Residing Independently of Parents	12.3	14.8	38.5

Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

[6] The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes unemployment rates for "recent high school dropouts." Among youth who dropped out between October 2000 and October 2001, the white unemployment rate was 32.4 percent and the Hispanic unemployment rate was 32.6 percent. The similarity of the white and Latino rates is noteworthy. In order to be in the BLS tabulation, the youth had to be enrolled in high school in October 2000. These figures again underscore the importance when assessing Latino youth status of determining whether they have ever been enrolled in U.S. schools. Young Latino immigrants who have never been in U.S. schools have vastly different high school dropout behavior and substantially different labor market outcomes as well.

Gender

The Latino dropout population is significantly more male than the white and African American dropout populations. This feature stems from the high numbers of young Latino males who immigrate to find work opportunities and never attend U.S. schools. Latinas who drop out appear to experience a higher rate of teenage pregnancy than either white or Black female dropouts. In 2000 more than 20 percent of Latina dropouts reported having a child within the previous year, significantly above the white rate.

Poverty rate

The poverty status of Latino dropouts is similar to white high school dropouts. About a quarter of both white and Latino high school dropouts resides in poverty. This is surprising since child poverty is much higher for Latino children than white children. Nine percent of white children reside in poverty, versus twenty-seven percent of Hispanic children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2002).

This anomaly reflects the fact that Latino high school dropouts do relatively well in the labor market. In addition, Latino dropouts are much less likely to be living with their parents than white or African American dropouts. Among 16- to 17-year-old dropouts, more than half of Latinos do not reside with one or more of their parents. Latino dropouts are more than twice as likely to live independently of parents than either white or African American dropouts. Poverty status is based on a comparison of household income to needs. The differing living arrangements of Latino dropouts may result in their households having a larger number of earners and/or fewer siblings in the households.

Not surprisingly, the tendency to live independently of parents is particularly marked among immigrant Latino dropouts, especially those not schooled in the U.S. who migrate for jobs. But comparing 16- to 17-year-old Latino dropouts to Latino youth of the same age who remain in school, native dropouts are much more likely to be residing independently of their parents than the native or immigrant Hispanic in-school population.

CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt that we need to concentrate on the educational achievement and attainment of our nation's Hispanic youth. Almost all the growth in the number of U.S. youth over the next 20 years will be Hispanic.[7] Reflecting this concern, the trends in the aggregate Hispanic high school dropout rate are

[7] The Census Bureau projects that the school age population will increase by 5.6 million children out to 2025. Of that increase, Latino children will increase by 5.2 million.

widely publicized. Although these rates are helpful in understanding the work force preparation of our nation's youth and the economic difficulties that lie ahead for our nation's less fortunate youth, these rates poorly characterize how Latino youth are faring in U.S. elementary and secondary education. A significant portion of Latino dropouts has never been enrolled in U.S. schools. The educational characteristics of these immigrant Hispanic teens reflect the education systems and economic conditions in their home countries, migration trends, and the labor demands of the U.S. economy, but not the performance of U.S. schools.

So how are Latino youth faring in U.S. elementary and secondary education? High school dropout rates are just one facet of a complicated evaluation. Latino dropout rates suggest that U.S. schools, on average, have improved their performance in assisting Latino youth to stay in school and graduate. The native-born Latino high school dropout rate among 16- to 19-year-olds fell from 15.2 percent to 14.0 percent during the 1990s. These are youths who presumably spent their academic careers in U.S. schools. Nonetheless, this dropout rate remains substantially above the white rate of 8.2 percent. School systems faced a deluge of Latino children during the 1990s when the number of 16- to 19-year-old Hispanics increased 56 percent (Figure 2). Yet dropout rates declined.

One in three Latino high school dropouts are educated abroad and the majority in this group comes to the U.S. in search of jobs. These youth have high rates of employment and are paid more than any other dropouts in the U.S. labor market. In comparison to other Latino youth, they have very poor English-speaking skills. Nearly 80 percent of them do not speak English. They also have almost no exposure to formal U.S. education. Because of their focus on labor market opportunities, they appear to have little incentive to complete their education once in the United States and would face high barriers particularly with language. It is difficult to envision high schools effectively intervening with these youth and motivating them to earn a high school degree.

On the other hand, a large chunk—about 40 percent—of Hispanic high school dropouts are native-born. These youth have been in U.S. schools since kindergarten and thus the educational and cultural gulfs that must be crossed are much narrower. Nearly all of them are fluent English speakers and they are less active and less successful in the labor market than immigrants. Native-born Latino dropouts have employment and unemployment rates very similar to white high school dropouts. Targeting resources on Latino youth who have long exposure to U.S. K-12 education seems much more likely to improve Latino high school graduation rates.

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APPENDIX A: DATA SOURCES

The high school dropout levels, rates, and characteristics are based on several U.S. Census Bureau data samples. The 1990 figures derive from the 1990 Summary Tape File 3 (STF3). The 1990 rates by nativity displayed in Figure 1 are tabulated from the 1990 5% Public Use Micro Sample (PUMS).

The 2000 rates displayed in Figure 1 derive from the 2000 Summary File 3 (SF3). The SF3 data presents selected information from the 2000 Decennial Census long-form questionnaire that was mailed to about one in six U.S. households or about 15 percent of U.S. households. Assuming 16- to 19-year-olds are evenly distributed across households, about 2.3 million 16- to 19-year-olds responded to the Decennial Census long-form. The descriptive tabulations are based on the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS). Conducted during 2000, C2SS used the instrument and methods of the American Community Survey to collect information on 700,000 U.S. households. The C2SS public use micro sample has information on 370,000 persons. The unweighted sample size of 16- to 19-year-olds used in the report are shown in Appendix Table A.

Although similar to the Decennial Census, the C2SS differs from the Decennial Census in at least two relevant aspects. First, the population is different. The Census enumerates all resident persons. C2SS interviews persons in households and thus omits persons in group quarters (e.g., noninstitutional group quarters such as college dormitories and military barracks, and institutions such as correctional facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals). Second, the school enrollment question differs between the two questionnaires. The Census long-form asks "At any time since February 1, 2000, has this person attended regular school or college?" Since the date of enumeration is April 1, 2000, the Decennial Census allows for a two month enrollment interval. The C2SS questionnaire asks whether the respondent has attended any time in the past three months, and thus has a longer enrollment interval. In spite of these differences, the Hispanic status high school dropout rate is identical in both data sources when rounded to the third digit.

Table A. Unweighted Sample Sizes for 16-to-19 Year olds, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

					Immigrant Hispanic	
	NonHispanic White	NonHispanic Black	Hispanic	Native Hispanic	Educated in U.S. Schools	Educated Abroad
Total Population	13,340	2,190	2,343	1,633	579	131
High School Dropouts*	872	262	389	194	81	114

*Refers to individuals who have not completed high school and are not currently enrolled in school.

APPENDIX B: OTHER MEASURES OF THE HISPANIC DROPOUT RATE

> "Unfortunately, we found that Hispanic students are far more likely to drop out of high school and much less likely to earn a college degree. In fact, *one of every three* [emphasis in the original] Hispanic American students fails to complete high school." – From Risk to Opportunity: Fulfilling the Educational Needs of Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century, The Final Report of the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, March 31, 2003

Measures of the high school dropout rate for Hispanics differ considerably depending on the age range used in the calculation. Including older age groups increases the number of immigrants who never studied in U.S. schools that are counted as dropouts. This decreases the value of the statistic as a performance indicator for the American educational system.

This report measures the status dropout rate for 16-to-19 years olds and finds that in 2000 the overall Hispanic dropout rate was 21 percent. The National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education uses a 16- to 24-year-old range and found an overall Hispanic dropout rate of 28 percent in 2000. The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans used a range of 18- to 24-year-olds and concluded that "one of every three" Hispanics was a dropout in 2000. (The report actually cites a completion rate of 64.1 percent for Hispanics in 2000.) Both the national center and the president's advisory committee used the October 2000 Current Population Survey for their calculations while this report used data from the much larger Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF3) and Census 2000 Supplementary Survey.

As a measure of school performance, Hispanic dropout rates are problematic for older age groups because the difficulties introduced by persons educated abroad become more severe. In 2000, there were nearly 1.6 million dropouts among 18- to 24-year-old Hispanics compared to 529,000 among 16- to 19-year-olds. By far the largest share of the difference between those numbers is in the category of immigrant Latinos educated abroad. There are some 557,000 more of them in the older age range compared to the 16- to 19-year-olds. Among 18- to 24-year-old Hispanics, about 21 percent of the population are immigrants who received all their education abroad while only 8 percent of 16- to 19-year-old Hispanics are educated abroad. The overwhelming majority of 18- to 24-year-old Latinos that are educated abroad are high school dropouts (Appendix Table B). These young adults did not

drop out of U.S. schools. Including Hispanics that are educated abroad substantially pulls up the high school dropout rate. The estimated high school dropout rate for all Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds is about 36 percent in 2000. The estimated dropout rate for Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds that are likely educated all or in part in U.S. schools is about 25 percent. The dropout rate for native-born Hispanics is higher in the older age range in part because of the substantial number of youth who are still enrolled in school when they are 19 years old but then fail to complete high school.

The basic demographic issue is fairly straightforward. The older the Latino population one is examining, the incidence of individuals that received all their education abroad rises. Thus, the aggregate estimated high school dropout rate becomes a poorer reflection of U.S. K-12 system performance for older age groups.

Table B. Weighted Counts for Hispanic 18-to-24 Year olds, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey

			Immigrant Hispanic	
	Hispanic	Native Hispanic	Educated in U.S. Schools	Educated Abroad
Total Population	4,392,639	2,273,864	1,198,569	920,206
High School Dropouts*	1,591,838	535,475	327,952	728,411
High School Dropout Rate (in percent)	36.2	23.5	27.4	79.2

*Refers to individuals who have not completed high school and are not currently enrolled in school.

APPENDIX C: DATA FOR CALIFORNIA, TEXAS AND FLORIDA

As the following table illustrates, the trends described in this report can manifest themselves in different ways at the state level depending on both the specifics of the demographic change and the performance of the education system in a given state.

California registered a substantial improvement in its overall dropout rate between 1990 and 2000. The dropout rate for the Hispanic youth as a whole fell dramatically from 25 percent to 18 percent. For native-born Hispanic youth the dropout rate in 2000 was 10.0 percent, still twice as high than the rate of 4.6 percent for non-Hispanic whites. The rate for immigrant Hispanics, while still high in 2000, showed improvement compared to 1990.

Texas registered a very minor improvement in its overall dropout rate between 1990 and 2000. In a context that did not show substantial gains in the education system, the rate for native-born Hispanics increased somewhat, and the rate for immigrant Hispanics showed even greater deterioration.

Florida showed an improvement in its overall dropout rate that was reflected in the rate for native-born Hispanics. However, the rate for immigrant Hispanics worsened. That is at least in part the result of a change in the Latino immigrant flow to Florida, which has included an increasing share of persons from countries other than Cuba.

Table C: California, Texas, and Florida 16-to-19 Year-Old High School Dropout[*] Rates

	Total	Hispanic	Native Hispanic[†]	Immigrant Hispanic[†]	NonHispanic White alone	Black alone	Asian or Pacific Islander alone
Total U.S.							
2000 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	9.8	21.0	14.0	33.7	6.9	11.7	4.3
1990 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	11.2	21.7	15.2	33.7			
California							
2000 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	10.1	17.8	10.0	34.2	4.6	8.5	3.5
1990 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	14.2	25.4	13.8	38.5			
Texas							
2000 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	12.5	20.7	16.9	35.4	6.6	10.5	3.9
1990 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	12.9	19.5	16.1	33.6			
Florida							
2000 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	11.9	18.8	13.2	26.0	9.7	11.8	6.1
1990 High School Dropout Rate (in %)	14.3	18.2	15.2	19.9			

Source: Decennial Census SF3 data

[*]Refers to individuals who have not completed high school and are not currently enrolled in school.

[†]The 2000 dropout rate is derived from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS). The 1990 dropout rate is derived from the 1990 5% Public Use Micro Sample.

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